

Rev. Donato Infante III
September 30, 2018

“Padre, padre, una monetina.” Father, Father, some change. A small coin, really. These were the words I heard on a daily basis walking through the streets of Rome for five years. Five years is enough time to get to know the people I saw on the street fairly well: to know their names, to have a sense of who was honest and who was a scam artist.

They needed rent-money, breakfast before sending kids to school, prescription drugs, special shampoo because lice was going around the kids’ school, etc.. The challenge? Buy one kid breakfast, and now every beggar says, “Ma, Padre, hai comprato colazione per gli altri.” Father, you bought breakfast for the others. And yes, so why not these ones as well? I made a conscience decision to cease buying breakfasts, but other help would still be provided, and that I would fast from breakfast and offer that intention for the beggars. I was in solidarity with them, but there was also a mixed motive. If a parent said, “But my kids have not had breakfast and they need to go to school,” I could reply, “N’anchio. Me neither.” And each seminarian had to decide how he would handle it. Eventually the seminary began providing store bought food items that we could bring to people, a much more economical means. It’s like the difference between a box of donuts at the grocery store or an individual one each day at Dunkin’. One American Cardinal living in Rome, possibly the most meek and humble man I ever met, carried a change purse just of one euro coins to give to the poor. One coin for each beggar. That was his solution. One day, a beggar I knew well, Monica, (they were more than happy to work when they could find it, so I used her as my seamstress for alterations and her husband as my shoe-shine) asked me for a Christmas tree. I was livid! “How dare she ask for something so non-essential!” I thought. I just kindly explained that there were others more in need, like to build a well in Ethiopia where I know it was truly a life or death situation. She understood. Really, though, was I precluded from doing both? Yes, I had tithed, so I could say, “I’ve been generous.” But what did I do with those \$40? Go out to eat one more time that month? What’s that, when measured against the joy of her three kids? The danger in sharing such a story with you is that you think I am being too hard on myself, but that misses the point. Maybe what I did was right, but it was an example of poor moral discernment because I acted not out of freedom but out of fear. “What if I later need those \$40 for something?”

In 1936, Blessed Bartolome Blanco Marquez was put to death for his faith. He was 21, proving that great holiness is possible even for the young. His dying words were, “Viva Cristo Rey,” or “Love live Christ the King!” He wrote to his girlfriend as he was just hours before his death, “Do not forget that I am looking at you from heaven, and try to be a model Christian woman, since, in the end, worldly goods and delights are of no avail if we do not manage to save our souls.”

St. James reminds his listeners of the same thing in today’s second reading. James is infuriated that people have stored up so much wealth that it has rotted, while these same rich people have failed to pay their workers.

“Your wealth has rotted away, your clothes have become moth-eaten,
your gold and silver have corroded,

and that corrosion will be a testimony against you...Behold, the wages you withheld from the workers who harvested your fields are crying aloud”

Injustice to the wage earner is classically one of the sins known as ones that cry out to Heaven for vengeance. Another one is neglect of widows and orphans and other marginalized people. Scripture calls us to be just in all our dealings and also to care for the poor. I often wonder what James would think of our society with its constantly widening income gap, full-time working people who still need to be on government assistance or who need a second job, and the vast amounts of waste we produce. Are you familiar with the phrase, “First world problems?” Food expires in our first world fridges, while others go without. On a trip to Benin, I was sitting next to a Franciscan who began eating the bones of a fish. When done properly, apparently this is safe. He said, “In my country, we cannot afford to waste these.” While the Franciscans from Benin where we were staying did not eat the bones, I felt compelled to join the friar on my right in trying to do this. While I could bring myself to pick out the eyes and eat them, I just couldn’t eat the bones. I physically could not chew them like he did. Trying it made what this other Franciscan did out of desperation even more remarkable. Talk about not being a picky eater!

We have a saying from the early Church that comes from St. Ambrose, a bishop of Milan, Italy from the first centuries of the Church, "It is the hungry [man's](#) bread that you withhold, the naked [man's](#) cloak that you store away, the money that you bury in the earth is the price of the poor [man's](#) ransom and freedom."

Ambrose was not the only one who took such a strong stance against stockpiling our wealth. The Fathers of the Church were quite severe in this regard. St. Basil of Caesarea was even stronger, saying

“Now, someone who takes a man who is clothed and renders him naked would be termed a robber; but when someone fails to clothe the naked, while he is able to do this, is such a man deserving of any other appellation?” Meaning, they too, should be called robbers. He continues, “The bread which you hold back belongs to the hungry; the coat, which you guard in your locked storage-chests, belongs to the naked; the footwear moldering in your closet belongs to those without shoes.” Etc.

How one lives out these teachings is a question that will vary from circumstance to circumstance, a matter of personal discernment, like we had to sort out personally in Rome. The Church has never suggested that the abolishing of private property was something that Christians were called to do. In fact, the Church has said people have by nature a right to plan for the future. You know for example that you need to pay for college in the future, so it is right to save. The order of charity properly teaches us that charity begins at home. Further, even St. Paul remarked that those who can work but refuse to should not eat. Lastly, the Church does not have a political platform, although she does make statements on justice and charity in regard to economics. So this homily is not about politics. It is about our own personal moral discernment. Then what do we do with today’s second reading?

Today's second reading challenges us today to *simplify*, so that we might truly be generous. Saint John Paul II issued strong words to the Catholics of the United States on this topic in his homily in New York City in 1979. I will conclude with some of his words:

“On many occasions, your nation has gained a well-deserved reputation for generosity, both public and private. Be faithful to that tradition, in keeping with your vast possibilities and present responsibilities....But this is not enough....The poor of the United States and of the world are your brothers and sisters in Christ. You must never be content to leave them just the crumbs from the feast. You must take of your substance, and not just of your abundance, in order to help them. And you must treat them like guests at your family table.”